



World Conferences in the Fight for Women's Rights

Dongxiao Liu, Texas A&M University

As female roles and rights change quickly across the globe, women's organizations push for gender equality in developed and developing countries alike. But how do such organizations make a difference beyond economic trends and government policy? Part of the answer lies in international relationships and leverage. Nonprofit groups are involved, and so is the United Nations, which sponsors many initiatives and has regularly convened world conferences. Most recently, the Fourth World Conference on Women was held in Beijing, China in 1995.

United Nations world conferences are like years-long political campaigns. Some 5,000 government delegates and 30,000 women activists gathered in Beijing for two weeks in late August and early September in 1995. But years of mobilization preceded and followed.

- From 1993 to 1995, 189 governments participated in regional and global preparatory meetings to negotiate the Platform for Action, and women activists also met by the hundreds and thousands in regional and global forums exchanging experiences and formulating inputs.
- The book-length Platform finalized in Beijing set the stage for further actions to advance gender equality in participating nations, and in 2000 "Beijing+5" was held in New York to review implementation steps and renew momentum into the 21st century.

My research tracks the mobilization of women's organizations to participate in the Fourth World Conference and analyzes the after-effects. In particular, I used interviews and field work to look closely at women's organizations and the impact of the world conference in India and China, two populous, rising powers with entrenched patriarchal traditions. India is the world's largest democracy, and China is the largest authoritarian polity. How did world conference participation play out in two such different political systems?

Impacts in China and India

Conventional wisdom might lead us to expect that world conference participation would have a big impact in a democracy but create only a ripple in an authoritarian polity. In actuality, outcomes in India and China showed no neat correspondence to regime characteristics. The Fourth World Conference had major effects in both countries, yet the effects were in some realms more important in China.

- A much wider range of women participated in India than in China. Indian participants included women from the lower castes, religious minorities, and tribal groups, while in China participants came mainly from a small and homogenous segment of urban professional women.
- Like their Chinese counterparts, activists in India leveraged the Fourth World Conference in their policy debates with government authorities; they built organizations in the name of the Fourth World Conference; and they hammered out movement identities in intense dialogue with labels endorsed by the Conference for participating non-governmental organizations.
- The Fourth World Conference facilitated the formation of nineteen new women's organizations in China, but helped only four additional ones take wing in India.
- Both the Indian and Chinese governments endorsed the Fourth World Conference's most anticipated achievement, the Platform for Action, which spells out what governments, women's movements, international organizations, and even commercial banks should do to further gender equality.
- But women's activists diverged. The Chinese activists argued that the World Conference agenda correctly identified causes and solutions to gender discrimination, while the Indian activists argued that the agenda too closely resembled their government's neo-liberal style policies, and thus was insufficient.

Leaders of the Chinese women's organizations were more positive than their Indian counterparts about the global identity and strategies endorsed by the Fourth World Conference.

What Can be Learned?

My analysis suggests lessons about the ways in which world conferences and similar transnational campaigns may energize and connect with domestic social movements – such as the women's rights efforts I studied in India and China.

- To understand the possible effects, both authoritarian and democratic contexts need to be broken down into more nuanced relationships between governments and social movements and among social groups themselves. It is a mistake to expect world conferences or other transnational efforts to have a uniform, predictable effect depending only on the type of political systems from which participants come.
- Authoritarian regimes certainly do place serious constraints on women's rights activism, and the scope for action is likely to remain greater for government officials than for groups operating on their own. But in authoritarian systems as in all others, we find various relations between governments and citizens. Even in non-democratic regimes, there will be arenas in which participation in a world conference can allow existing or newly formed groups to set agendas and encourage officials to take new kinds of actions.
- In democratic regimes, citizens groups enjoy more room to maneuver, but much depends on whether civil society actors are well-established and what they aim to do. Established and independent-minded groups may be able to use world conferences to challenge and move well ahead of existing domestic government policies.

In sum, domestic rights movements cannot change the type of a regime. But they can achieve efficacy beyond their national regime type leads us to expect. Prior changes in women's organizational capacities and their ability to set agendas were the key to understanding the sometimes paradoxical impacts of the Fourth World Conference in India and China. Sponsors of transnational campaigns should pay attention to ongoing developments within and among domestic organizations, and look for ways to boost their capacities to pursue specific reforms. Domestic groups, in turn, should recognize that world conferences are sources of long-term leverage much more than simple events. Domestic groups can use conferences in many ways.